

Communicating to heterogeneous target groups

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Communicating to heterogeneous target groups – an experimental reception analysis.

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1.1 The situation

By legislation Danish local and regional administrations are bound to publish information documenting the services that they offer their citizens. This means that there is a great deal of work going on to produce various kinds of service pamphlets and booklets. Whereas the pamphlets and booklets cover a wide range of subjects, my project deals with pamphlets on special schools for disabled people and on social matters (e.g. drinking problems). I work with the pamphlet entitled “Service to people with speaking, hearing or seeing disabilities” (the 2002-2003 edition)

None of this work was ever evaluated from a communication point of view. There have been evaluations dealing with the usefulness of the pamphlets from an administration point of view (Helt 1998) and there are several publications dealing with how the administration makes the best of the work in the sense that much of the information, goal formulations etc. can also be used internally to supervise and control various aspects of government work (Helt 1994a, KL 1994b). Even if the titles (*Focus on the users, Focus on citizens and business*) seem to indicate so, these publications see the service pamphlets from an administration point of view, and so the recommendations issued are recommendations as to how the administrative staff get the work done rather than what are the needs of different groups of receivers of the pamphlets.

Also a number of publications give directions on the outline (for this and other text analytic terms, please consult Bülow-Møller and Pedersen 1998) and the contents of the pamphlets (Helt 1994a, 1994b) as well as on public communication in general (Becker Jensen 1995 [1987], 2001, Hansen et al. 1971, Petersen 1997a, 1997b). None of these directions are based in any kind of reception analyses.

What I attempt to do is to make up for the lack of evaluations in actually asking members of the target population for a service pamphlet published by the county of Ringkjøbing (CR) in Western Denmark whether they experience understanding of the

pamphlet or not, and whether they feel that the pamphlet satisfies their needs for information etc.

Also I confront the target group with different versions of the service pamphlet in order for me to be able to verify the effects, if any, different approaches to written communication have on the target population.

The empirical data produced in the interviews will be analysed as part of a discourse analysis¹ of one of the service pamphlets published by CR. In the analysis I will compare the discourses sought activated by CR, the discourses as they manifest themselves in the pamphlet and the discourses activated in the interviews but not present in the pamphlet.

1.2 The pamphlet in brief

The pamphlet is a flyer that is supposed to be given to people with hearing, talking or seeing disabilities (or their relatives).

The pamphlet text begins by listing five overall goals, and then lists the main tasks of the county. After that the text goes on to mention the various services, starting with the services to people with talking disabilities. First children and young people and then adults. After that the services to first people with hearing disabilities and then people with seeing disabilities are listed. Also these services are separated in two, viz., children and young people and after that, adults. At the end of the text, the county lists five service goals they target and five requirements that CR sets out to meet. On the final page the reader finds addresses and telephone numbers relevant to people using the services mentioned in the pamphlet.

The target group is heterogeneous in many respects; firstly there are three over all target groups, viz., the users, the staff dealing with the users and, finally, the citizens of the CR. The pamphlet begins with a formulation of the county's goals for the area and ends with list of addresses and telephone numbers. The main text is divided into three parts, reflecting the three kinds of disabilities dealt with. The three parts share the same outline and the goals are also valid for the entire pamphlet.

¹ My discourse analysis is basically a Faircloughian one, but it is very much inspired by Schrøder's (2001), criticism of Fairclough's lack of including empirical material dealing with the reception of media texts.

The text is characterised by a high number of nominalizations and passives and so the changes that I make in the alternative versions will be changes that address these characteristics (more about this below).

1.3 The reception analysis

Normally in communications research communicators are advised to narrow down their target group in order to be able to communicate as precisely as possible (Cheesmann and Thing Mortensen 1998). Not so in the case of information pamphlets. They are produced along organisational lines and thus reflect internal organisational patterns in local and regional governmental offices. In addition the service pamphlets address people that share certain circumstances, dire life conditions, some kind of handicap etc. Conditions that are relatively independent of social or educational situation and that therefore make for quite a diverse target group including members from a variety of social classes.

This is why I found it interesting to find out if and how the target population uses the information pamphlets.

The reception analysis is supposed to reveal whether or not the target population receives the pamphlet at all. Also I hope that it will show which parts of the communication process are the more successful ones.

The interviews referred to in this paper are interviews conducted in the homes of and with people who have been using the services of CR for quite a while. Some of them have had their hearing disability since they were born and others got it later in life, but even so, all of them have been in the system for more than thirty years. The interview sessions had lasted from some 45 minutes up to about one hour.

The reception analysis falls in two parts, viz., reception of the original pamphlet, reception of version 1 and reception of version 2.

1.3.1 The three texts

In this section I will briefly characterise the original text in the pamphlet (a more comprehensive genre analysis can be found in Pedersen 2002a).

As mentioned above, the original text is characterised by nominalizations and passive constructions. We see that in the formulations at the beginning of the text on services to children with hearing disabilities:

The hearing consultant is the contact person to families with children with hearing disabilities. Through the hearing consultant there is a possibility to individually get advice and supervision

1.3.2 Version 2

The transition of the original into version 2 was rather straightforward. The outline is retained, so is the division between the three groups of disabled people. The changes are basically changes in vocabulary (replacing words that stem from the administration/the professionals for everyday words) and changes in grammar (resolving phrasal verbs into phrases, changing passive constructions into active counterparts).

These changes constitute what Fairclough (1995:137-8) calls conversationalisation because they are supposed to mimic real life conversation by addressing the receiver by the use of linguistic means such as e.g. second person pronouns. Fairclough problematises the phenomenon by saying that it might be used as a kind of "'synthetic personalization'" (ibid.). I use it in the more positive sense of accommodating one's communication to the target group. The part cited above was changed into:

The hearing consultant is your family's contact. Here you get advice and supervision with you child's hearing problem as the point of departure.

So version 2 is very much like the original. I designed it like this because I wanted to see if the changes in grammar and vocabulary seemed to have an effect on the receivers' reading of the pamphlet, and because these are changes that are recommended by much literature on writing well in public administration

1.3.3 Version 3

Version 3 is a slightly more radical change in relation to the original. This version goes one step further in the process of conversationalisation. First of all it is addressed not to three different target groups, but only to people with hearing disabilities, secondly it tries to reflect the needs of the users' of the service rather than the organisation of the county, by frequent use of sub-headlines. The sample extract was changed into:

Talk to the hearing consultant

The hearing consultant is your family's contact. Here you get advice and supervision with you child's hearing problem as the point of departure.

In version 3 I omitted the formulation of goals and tasks that occur right at the beginning in the other two versions. This is problematic in the sense that the legislation in the area demands that goals and targets be formulated in for the citizens to be able to control regional and local governmental agencies. My reason for not including goals and tasks is that it makes the text so much shorter.

1.4 The reception analyses

Basically I perform two reception analyses, one with the original pamphlet and one with version 2.

I do not let the interviewees read the original glossy flyer-type pamphlet. Instead I present them with a laser printed version of the text. I have chosen to do so, because it makes the original text look very much like the amended versions, and thereby I hope to eliminate any preferences that the interviewees may have towards the printed, glossy pamphlet. I also hope that this form of confrontation will force the receivers to focus on the text rather than features like paper quality, print quality or layout.

In the interview situation I first probe the interviewees' knowledge of the services that CR offers and that is relevant to the target group. I do that by asking them whether they find themselves well informed of the county services in the hope of initiating a conversation that will reveal the interviewees' knowledge of the services. Note that whether or not the target population knows the services does not have to be a reflection of their having read the pamphlet. The knowledge brought forth in the interview might just as well stem from the target population's day-to-day dealings with the county.

After that I show the interviewees the original pamphlet in order to find out whether or not the interviewee already knows it. If he or she knows the pamphlet, I give him or her the original text, and if he or she does not know the text, I give him or her version 2 (to ensure response to the original text, I do not allow two interviewees in a row to be exposed to version 2).

I then give the interviewee some time to read the pamphlet. After reading the pamphlet the receivers are asked questions to the effect of letting them express their likes or dislikes for the text in question, their views on the informational content etc.

After the discussing the contents of either of the two versions, I hand the receivers the version of the text that they have not seen yet and ask them to comment on the difference between the two texts. In the cases where the interviewees seem positive towards version 2, I also give them version 3 in order to monitor their reaction towards an even more conversationalised text.

1.4.1 The reception of the pamphlets

Only one of the interviewees has actually seen the pamphlet before:

Well. I just grab all kinds of material that has just the remotest relation to my condition [ahc, female 48 ys].

In general the interviewees are positive towards the pamphlet. They find the presence of an effort to inform them good. The interviewees that were first confronted with the original text have very little to say against it except from the fact that it is very scarce on specifics.

All the interviewees agree that version 2 is nicer to read than the original.

Well this is so much nicer, it uses ‘you’ and is so much easier to understand, but like the other one it hasn’t got to many specifics [ahc, female 48 ys].

one more to the same effect

One interviewee refuses to choose between the two versions:

Well I don’t know ... I’m not in a position to ... I couldn’t say which one I prefer [vs, male 70 ys]

But earlier in the interview when reading version 2, he enters into a dialogue with the text:

[reading] well, yes that’s right they have all this stuff for children. That’s really something [reading on] Oh yes; they do that a lot, only now they ...[vs, male 70 ys]

As mentioned earlier, versions 2 and 3 of the text is meant to be examples of conversationalisation is the most positive sense of the word and therefore this last reaction to the text is very interesting, since it seems to confirm the notion that the text strikes up a conversation with the reader.

1.4.2 Is it the correct medium?

I asked the interviewees if they could think of any alternative media for the information in the pamphlet, and they pointed to media such as local newspapers or the periodical *Raptus* which is a periodical published by the Council, dealing with all kinds of subjects relevant to the county:

I think that it'd be a good idea to publish such information in *Raptus*. [BS, female, 52 ys].

When asked what would be the better medium, the interviewees prefer *Raptus* or one of the local free weekly newspapers to a paid newspaper, because everybody gets the former.

No, it can't be a [paid] newspaper. It must be something that everyone gets [BS, female, 52 ys].

One of the informers sees *Raptus* as the only possible medium, since she's had bad experiences with newspapers:

Well they [the ads from the county] seem to disappear in newspapers. I remember once we'd been on a course and later saw an ad for a repetition of the same course in the paper. The only reason why we saw it was that we'd been there before [ahc, female 48 ys].

But then she remembers that television might also be a good idea:

Or they could use television. If that's not too expensive[ahc, female 48 ys].

1.5 Themes and discourses in relation to the pamphlet

In order for me to be able to ask questions or introduce discussion topics that are relevant to the reception of the text I did a text analysis of the original pamphlet by means of which I identified an array of discourses that can be said to exist in the text. In the analysis of the interviews I also identified a number of discourses and tried to relate them to those identified in the interview material.

The discourses selected for the present paper are discourses that have something to do with sender's intentions with producing and publishing the text. The selection is done from the premise that the intentions for producing the pamphlet are common to all three versions of the text in the sense that they share the wish to inform the users or potential users of the services that the county offers to them.

1.5.1 The overall purpose: information

Unsurprisingly the pamphlet is supposed to fulfil a need for information or knowledge in the target population. As it turns out, such a need exists, but it is not met by the information in the pamphlet. When asked if the pamphlet tells them something that they didn't know or is new to them, the interviewees reject the notion:

No, nothing was new to me, well the part about the children was, but then that's not relevant to me ... [njt, male 71ys]

Nothing is new, but you must remember that I've been in this system for ages.

Two of the interviewees even correct an amount of money that one gets if one buys a hearing aid outside of the public system:

[reading] well that's 5000 kroner now ... [vs, male 70 ys]

But the pamphlet is not altogether obsolete since the list of addresses and phone numbers at the end of the pamphlet is seen as useful:

The address list is very good [ahc, female 48 ys]

Since there is no difference between the informational content in the different versions of the pamphlet it is interesting to note that version 2 and 3 are rated higher than the original text also when it comes to informational value.

One of the interviewees does see quite clearly that the texts are basically the same:

Well it doesn't really tell us more than the other text, does it? [ahc, female 48 ys]

Basically the interviewees, irrespective of the version they have read, say that the information that they get from the pamphlet is information that they already have. Rather than the information in the pamphlet the interviewees would like to have information that caters for their specific needs or at least deals with specific needs rather than with overall needs.

1.5.2 goals and service goals

The goals and service goals are seen as rather positive [not ahc]

1.6 Summing up

In conclusion we can say that it would seem that the pamphlet does not appear to appeal adequately to the intended target group. There are two reasons for this: First, the target population in general does not know the pamphlet. They did not see it before I presented it to them at the interview. Second, the pamphlet does not present the interviewees with new information and therefore remain uninteresting to the target population who seem to get their information from various county agencies such as *Center for Kommunikation* (which is where they pick up their hearing aids, have their hearing tested etc.) that is the interviewees' most important contact to the county's services.

In relation to the experiment it is obvious from the interviews that the interviewees prefer the conversationalised versions to the original version of the pamphlet text. The interviewees themselves explain that the reason for that is the fact that the two alternative versions use direct address and that the original does not.

On a methodological note, it is interesting to see that one of the interviewees does not want to discuss the differences between the texts, but nonetheless strikes up a conversation with the conversationalised text where the only reaction to the original text is a correction of a specific amount of money.

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